Concept of God in Madhva's Gītābhāṣya and Gītātātparya

By

Śāstranidhi, Dvaitavedāntarasajña, Madhvamunipriya,
Vimarśakasamrāṭ

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It has been suggested that this talk may be confined to Madhva's GB. and GT. I take it that this is intended to contain the volume of thought by confining it to a definite area of selection of material. But the marvel about M is that he is equally and uniformly profound and exhaustive in expounding his viewpoint in every one of his works, allowing no significant detail to escape. In this he is true to his name of 'Pūrṇaprajña'

Years ago, when I first skipped thro' his GB as a High school student, — I had an adequate knowledge of Samskṛt and its Śāstraic terminology and style at the time, to venture to approach out of insatiable curiosity the great classics of philosophy I was struck by one striking fact that appealed to my Taṭastha dṛṣṭi that tho' it was, by all accounts, his maiden debut into the philosophical arena and a work written in his early twenties, M had already before his mind's eye a complete pattern of his consolidated interpretations of the Sūtras and Upaniṣads to be given by him years later, in miniature form and in the settled outlines of their

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highways and byways of thought. It is said a battle is fought in the mind of the commander-in-chief before it is actually fought on the field. Such is the case with M. I may cite as examples, his references to the Sutras अंशो नानाव्यपदेशात्, आभास एव च, यावदात्मभावित्वात्तु in his GB. while propounding, for the first time his concept of the Jivātman standing in the relation of a Nirupādhipratibimba to Paramātman, under the verse:

अच्छेद्योऽयमदाह्योऽय-
मक्लेद्योऽशोष्य एव च।
नित्यः सर्वगतः स्थाणु-
रचलोऽयं सनातनः॥

In saying this, I should make it clear that I am looking at M. as one of the great thinkers of our land and not from the traditional view of his being an Avatār of the great Mukhya-Prāṇa.

M. is in good company in holding with some of the best thinkers of the East and the West that God is the primary subject matter of philosophy, the centre and fulcrum of all philosophical thought. Philosophy needs God for its meaningfulness God needs, no philosophy for His existence or meaningfulness:

प्राणबुद्धिमनः स्वात्म-
देहापत्य धनादयः।
यत्संपर्कात् प्रिया आसन्
ततः कोन्वपरः प्रियः?

Philosophy is the pursuit of Tattvajñāna, evidently of the highest truth. What is the highest truth that the human spirit should strive to understand and attain? The Gita answers:

* * प्रवक्ष्यामि ज्ञानानां ज्ञानमुत्तमम् यज्ज्ञात्वा नेह भूयोऽन्यत् ज्ञातव्यमवशिष्यते।

That is true knowledge after knowing which nothing more or higher remains to be known. Such knowledge includes and comprehends the lesser and lower ones, necessary for the orderly life on earth. Hence the classification of Vidyās into Parā and Aparā in the Upaniṣad. The lesser Vidyas are not Avidyā but Vidyās to be acquired for limited objectives and ends. The right way of giving the Aparā Vidyās their due is to act within their framework with the realisation that cosmic life is under the eternal and constant control and impulsion of the Paratattva, the unseen Power and independent source of all finite reality परतंत्रप्रमेयं हि स्वतंत्रभगवदायत्ततया विदितं निःश्रेयसाय भवति.

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God as the One and Only Svatantra Real

It is worthy of note that the most crucial point of M's metaphysics and conceptions of God is that He is to be posited as "Svatantra" and all else comprising finite reality (matter and souls) as A-svatantra or Paratantra. The concept of Svatantra is defined in terms of what is

स्वरूप प्रमितिप्रवृत्तिषु परानपेक्षम् ।

the res ompleta that which exists by itself and is capable of being explained entirely by itself. It exists by its own power (Anūd avātam svadhayā tad ekam), knows and acts by its own power, knows all else and actuates and energises them by its own power.

The immediate corollary of such a postulate is that a Svatantra Brahman or God cannot be "nirviśeṣa" without its own distinctive characteristics implicit in the concept of Svātantrya. It must necessarily be "Sa-viśeṣa" rich in its sovereign attributes. When the Gītācarya says:

न तदस्ति विना यत्स्यान्मया भूतं चराचरम् । मत्तः सर्वं प्रवर्तते । धारयाम्यहमोजसा । पचाम्यन्नं चतुर्विधम् । मयाध्यक्षेण प्रकृतिः सूयते स चराचरम् । मत्तः स्मृतिः ज्ञानमपोहनं च । बलं बलवतां चाहम् । जीवनं सर्वभूतेषु

He is only annotating the three terms in the definition of God as Svatantra that He is the Sattānimittam, pravrttinimittam and pramiti nimittam of the cosmos. (सत्तानिमित्तं, प्रवृत्तिनिमित्तं, प्रमिति निमित्तम्)

How God's Svātantrya is Explicated

Svātantrya top be realised has to be explicated. As M. aptly puts it तद्वशत्व ज्ञापनार्थमेव सृष्ट्युक्तिः It is expressed or God expresses his Svātantrya thro' the eightfold dispensation of cosmic life, consisting of creation, sustenance, dissolution, control, obscuration, enlightenment, bondage and release, in respect of the history of the world of matter and souls. The expansion of the commonly known threefoid cosmic functions of God, so as to embrace five more important ones so vital to the realisation of the highest Puruṣārtha of selves viz Mokṣa, is a standing testimony to M's unerring philosophical insight and alertness. The concept of God's Svatantrya thus epitomizes all other ideas of God such as His Pūrnatva, सर्वज्ञत्व सर्वशक्तिमत्व

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स्वेतर समस्तविलक्षणत्व as they unfold themselves in the history and evolution and progress of the world of matter and souls.

Positive Content of the Concept of God

The concept of God as Svatantratattva has a deep positive content and meaning unlike that of the metaphysical Absolute of some philosophers, in the East and in the West, who are obsessed by a fascination for a negative account of the highest reality. After all. God or Brahman is the real of the reals, the Cetana of the Cetanas as the Upaniṣad puts it. He must be so in a fully positive and direct sense of the terms and not indirectly by the back-door as "not being unreal, or not being insentient(अतदूव्यावृत्तिमुखेन) Modern apologists of Nirviśrṣabrahmavada are prone to argue that "to give a negative account of God is to affirm his immensity of being. When personality is denied to Him it is only in the interest of superpersonality"(Radhakrishnan, Eastern Religions and Western Thought. P. 192). Such an explanation, while it is in accord with a purely Theistic interpretaof Nirguṇatva in terms of:

सत्वादयो न सन्तीशे न सन्ति प्राकृता गुणाः अप्रसिद्धे रवाच्यं तत् वाच्यं सर्वागमोक्तितः। न तददीदृगिति ज्ञेयं न वाच्यं न च तर्क्यते पश्यन्तोपि न पश्यन्ति मेरो रूपं विपश्चितः निरनिष्टो निरवद्यः

is repugnant to pure unadulterated Nirviśeṣatvavada. By implication the concept of God as Svatantra in holding Him to be omniscient, omnipotent, Almighty, endowed with all auspicious attributes and unsullied by any imperfections to which finite selves are subject, can give no quarter to Maya approaching Him in any way: पूर्णं हि ब्रह्मशब्दस्यार्थः। न च दोषयुक्तस्य पूर्णत्वं संभवति। तस्मात् पारतंत्र्यात्पगुणत्वादि सर्ववस्तु स्वभावविलक्षण स्वभावं, सर्वत्र पूर्णगुणं, सर्वजीवजडेभ्योऽन्यत्, अज्ञानदुःखपारतंत्र्योत्पत्ति नाशादि सर्वदोष विवर्जितं ब्रह्मैव अशब्दार्थः अ इति ब्रह्मेति।

No wonder M. asks: कथं मायाव्यवच्छिन्नः पूर्णो मुख्यतया भवेत्

The concept of Svatantra is this vital to a true conception of God. Its nuances of thought and philosophical implications and corollaries have not been so fully, exhaustively and rigorously worked out in other systems of Indian Theism or in Christianity.

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Islam or Judaism, as in M's philosophy. This concept has no organic bearing or living interest to Absolutism, tho' it may talk glibly of the Independence of the Absolute In M's philosophy, it is not merely an article of faith but a living pulsating force with abiding impact on every aspect of finite life and movement, every moment :

खण्डिनी पाचनी शक्तिः तापनो
शोषणी तथा
नैव राजन् रवेः शामीः शामी-
नारायणस्य सा

The Svātantrya of God is illustrated equally in the concepts of His transcendence and immanence. Both are vital to Vedantic Theism and have been vividly expounded in the Gita The transcendent aspect of God is highlighted by the Viśvarūpādhyāya and the Puruṣottamayoga as can be appreciated without much diffieulty. His immanence in the universe is brought out, according to M., in a vivid manner in Chapters 7 and 10. It needs a deeper spiritual insight and perception to experience the profound depths of God's immanence at all layers and depths of cross sections of cosmic life set out in ths Gītā. Starting with the position of the two Prakṛtis mentioned in Chap. 7, vis a vis God, M. writes न केवलं ते जगत्प्रकृती मद्वशे इत्येतावत् महदैश्वर्यं इत्याह अहं सर्वस्य प्रभव इति। किंतु प्रभवादेः सत्ता प्रवृत्त्यादेः कारणत्वात् तद्भोक्तृत्वाच्च

The measure of My glory is not limited to the fact that the two Prakritis are actually under My control. The fact is I am the inner principle which confers upon these two Prakṛtis their very powers, characteristics and attributes which are supposed to be inherent in them and by which they carry on the work they are doing. They cannot lay claim to anything in their own right. In this sense, I am the source of the origin and dissolution of all.

Commenting on "Raso'ham apsu (VII, 8-12) M. writes that this introduces us to a profound aspect of God's immanence: अनादोयपि तत एव। तथापि रसादि स्वभावानां साराणां च स्वभावत्वे, सारत्वे च विशेषतोपि सएव नियामकः। न तु अनादिनियमानुबद्धो रसादिः, तत्सारत्वादिश्च इति दर्शयति "अप्सु-रसं" इत्यादि विशेषशब्दैः

* By using words like rasa or taste in the waters which denote specific

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characteristics of things, the Lord wishes it to be understood that He is the ultimate and proximate source not only of substances but of their distinctive properties as well, not to speak of the principles which determine the distinctiveness of such properties themselves in each case.

Concept of God as the Wonderful:

The philosophical obligations devolving on M's Theism to reinforce the reality of the world of matter and souls and of Pañcabheda (connoted by the term "Pra-pañca" established by Sākṣipratyakṣa, with the help of logic and dialectics against the seductions of monistic thought, has given room for an impression that there is no place in M's philosophy for a deep and passionate mystic approach to reality based on spiritual wonder and humility. A close study of M's works with particular reference to his sublime reflections on the unutterable majesty of God, the mysterious nature of His attributes and their interrelations, the intimate indissoluble nature of the relation of Jivas to God as His Pratibimbas and the final dependence on God's grace for the Jiva both to attain Aparokṣa and deliverance from Samsāra will bring out the deeper levels of Mysticism which underlie his conception of God in these directions.

One of the most important overtones of his concept of God is that He is the Wonder of Wonders: आश्चर्यवत् as there is nothing like Him. Panini defines āścaryam as anityam the unfamiliar Commenting on Gita II Āścaryavat pāṣyati..." M. writes आश्चर्यो भगवानेव God is the most wonderful thing in the world or rather the only wonderful thing that can be said to exist: आश्चर्योसिधन्योऽसि as the Dhanyāścaryādhyāya in the Harivamsa puts it. All else beside Him is drab, commonplace. Even the commonplace ordinary world of the senses excites so much wonder in scientific and philosophical minds not to speak of laymen. Samkara says, the world with its wonderful design and orderliness defies imagination: अस्य जगतो नामरूपाभ्यां व्याकृतस्यानेक कर्तृभोक्तृ संयुक्तस्य प्रतिनियतदेशकालनिमित्त क्रियाफलाश्रयस्य मनसाप्यचिन्त्य रचनारूपस्य

How much more wonderful, then, should the Author, sustainer, dissolver (!), reproducer and controller

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of such a world and myriads like it be? M. gives expression to this sentiment of philosophic wonder at Divine Majesty in his Dvadasastotra in a short but profound utterance: **बहुचित्र जगद्व-हुधाकरणात्परशक्तिरनन्तगुणः**

This is a paraphrase of the outpouring of the Vedic poet:

इयं विसृष्टिः (not **कुसृष्टिः**) **यत आबभूव**

Explaining the significance of the "vat" in āścarya-vat" pasyati kaścid enam" (One sees Him like a wonderful phenomenon) M. writes **आश्चर्यमेव सन्तमाश्चर्यवत् पश्यति कश्चित्** ।

The "Kaścit" is the Mystic Jñāni who sees God the wonderful as the wonderful. The ignorant man the "a-sura" preoccupied with the transient pleasures and attractions of the gross world (asuṣu rataḥ) dismisses God as commonplace and nothing wonderful or worth getting at and holding fast to. The implication of M's words **आश्चर्यमेव सन्तं** is that the suffix **वत्** in **आश्चर्यवत्** is not to be understood as likening God to something wonderful. For there is nothing to which He can be likened. He is beyord comparison: **न तत्समश्चाभ्याधिकश्च दृश्यते**

The Mystic perceives God the wonder of wonders as He is. The comparison is a self-comparison says M- **गगनं गगनाकारं सागरः सागरोपम इत्यादिवत्** ।

God then is like Himself alone and unlike everything else: **सर्वजीवजडेभ्यो विलक्षणः**

Unity and Diversity in the Divine Personality

The mystery (āścaryatva) of Divine nature of its attributes and Manifestations is elucidated by M with his distinctive concept of Saviśeṣābheda. God is a Person, a Being with a distinctive personality of His own M. has great deal enlightening to say on the intriguing problem of Divine personality.

Mystic vision is termed sākṣatkāra or seeing God face to face. The vision is believed to be "śāntam, śivam and sundaram", peaceful, auspicious and beautiful. Beauty without form is inconcelvable. Beautiful music has its form of melodious sounds and harmony. Beautiful painting has colour combination, light and shade and perspective. The Bhakta and the Mystic go into raptures over the Divine form of ravishing

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beauty that he sees—वंशीविभूषित-करात् or as M. puts it सुपूर्णवादि-मोहदं आनन्दस्य पदम्.

But the Form is not physical or material. It is Cinmaya. While Ramanuja introduces us to the idea of God as समस्तहेय प्रत्यनीककल्याणगुणैकतान

M tells us further that every attribute of God is identical with His being which is Jñānā-nandamaya. God is not an abstraction before He puts on His attributes as a coat or a collar. The attributes of God are countless and natural to His being: परास्य शक्तिर्विविधैव श्रूयते स्वाभाविकी such as ज्ञानबलक्रिया च

Their multiplicity or countlessness does not break His oneness or uniformity of essence (ekarasatva;) for they are all M tells us identical with one another thro' their identity with Him: तानि सर्वाण्य-योन्यस्वरूपाणि। विज्ञानमानंदं ब्रह्म। आनन्दो ब्रह्म, यस्य ज्ञानमय तपः स मा भग प्रविश।

They partake of one another's nature and essence, being severally identical with His essence, and therefore with one another too, without losing their distinctiveness. There lies the Mystery divine This inscrutable mystery of interrelation of substance and attributes among themselves is due to God's intrinsic nature and not due to any acquired power as of Yogasiddhi: न योगिन्वादीश्वरत्वान्।

This aisvarya or mysterious power is termed *Acintya-adbhutaśakti, inconceivable power of God which is real not mayāmaya. Without breaking up their inner identity of essence with God, these attributes admit of being distinguished in thought and language with the help of Viśeṣas (the nuances of being). Viśeṣa makes for distinctions of references without imposing a distinction of essence. It is not different from the being of God or absolutely identical with it so as not to be separable in thought and expression. While explaining and justifying its self linking capacity, Viśeṣa achieves integration without sacrificing the colourfulness or richness of the attributes. It is appropriately termed *Saviśeṣābheda "approximating to *identity in and thro' difference".

Surprisingly the same line of explanation of the precise relation between the being of God and

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His attributes has been put farward tho' not with so much precision and clearness of detail as in M. by his close Western contemporary St. Thomas Aquinas (1227-74): "God can have no existence, nature or essence distinguishable from His actual existence. Here, the distinction between an attribute and that which is the subject of the attribute would be meaningless also".

Personality of God

The question whether God is personal or impersonal whether He has a body or form or not is answered by M. with an Yes and a no. If by body or form we mean a physical or material vesture He is bodiless and formless:

अदेहो देहवांश्चैव प्रोच्यते परमेश्वरः अप्राकृतशरीरत्वात् अदेह इति कथ्यते शिरश्चरणबाह्यादिः पूर्ण ज्ञानादिरूपकः स्वयं स्वरूपवान् यस्मात् देहवांश्चोच्यते ततः

The reason given by M. why God should be regarded as having no phycical body cannot be improved upon or gainsaid. He is without a body because He transcends Prakṛti and its evolutes, being the source of their impulsion in their transformations: **अरूपवदेव हि तत्प्रधानत्वात्। तत्प्रधानत्वात् तदुक्तमत्वात्। प्रकृत्यादिप्रवर्तकत्वेन तदुक्तमत्वात् नैवरूपवत् ब्रह्म**

For. all forms known to us in finite reality are constituted of the five elements. God reascends not only the five elements but what lies beyond them—the Mūlaprakṛti. How then is it possible to ascribe Prākṛtic form colour and lineaments to such a Being? **भौतिकानि हि रूपाणि भूतेभ्योऽसौ परो यतः अरूपवानतः प्रोक्तः क तदव्यक्ततः परे**

As for His being with Form or innumerabie forms, the testimony of Śrutis and Smṛtis and the experience of Mystics confirms it. M. cites a few authorities: **आनन्दरूपमजरं यद्विभाति; सुवर्णज्योतिः कथं सुवर्णरूपत्वं स्यादरूपस्य। रुक्मवर्णं कर्तारं आदित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात् सर्वतः पाणिपादं विश्वतो मुखम्।**

One of the farreaching contributions of M. to Hindu theosophy and Theology is the rejection of any invidious distinction or gradation among the countless forms the Lord, be they Avatārs or other

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manifestations. There is no question of any of the Avatārs being born or dying. The Universe is filled with Divine Forms :

तेनेदं पूर्णं पुरुषेण सर्वम्,

potentially and actually (śakti and vyakti). The Lord is in each one of us and in everything yet apart from all: Tatstham tadvyatiriktam ca. He is the same in Heaven and on earth. As Viśva, He sustains the waking state of creatures, as Taijasa the dream state and as Prājñā the Suṣupti state. These differences of states make no difference to His Powers and attributes in any way। न स्थानतोपि परस्योभयलिंगं सर्वत्र हि

Madhva says well :

तत्र तत्र स्थितो विष्णुः तत्तच्छक्ति प्रबोधकः
एक एव महाशक्तिः कुरुते सर्वमंजसा

In one sense then, God is the busiest person in the cosmos taking no rest or a single holiday, as the Sṛṣṭyādyaṣṭaka-vyāpāra goes on for ever in Samsāra, Pralaya and Mokṣa too, according to needs of each state. But He is never fatigued or distracted by such ceaseless exertion and remains the same Blissful self. In this sense He is the Kartā while remaining Akarta (Tasya kartāram api mām viddhi akartāram). The Śrutis affirm that God's activities are an expression of his bliss.

कोह्येवान्यात् कः प्राण्यात् यदेष आकाश आनन्दो न स्यात्

There is no question of the Supreme who controls everything by His mere will, getting tired, distracted or thwarted by opposition from any quarter. Raising the question whether the stupendous task of running the endless round of cosmic management will not impose any strain, boredom or fatigue on God, M. answers in the words of the Sūtra: Antaryāmyadhidaivādiṣu.....” :

रमणं नातियत्नस्य विक्षेपादेव युज्यते
इति चेत् सर्वनियमो यस्य क स्यान्न शक्यते
स्वात्मना अनियतं वस्तु प्रतीपं ह्यात्मनो भवेत्
स्वाधीनसत्ताशक्त्यादि कथमात्म प्रतीपकम् ?

He sums up the idea of God in the following words. He is the highest form of perfection conceivable by human understanding :

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इत इदमाधिकं इतोऽपीदं इति सर्वाधिकत्वेन ततोऽधिकाभावेनावशेषितम्
(B.T.)

अतोऽशेषगुणोन्नद्धं निर्दोषं यावदेव हि ।
तावदेवेश्वरो नाम ।

We are nobody to prescribe a limit to the number of qualities or attributes God can possess. All that we can say of Him is that He possesses infinite number of attributes beyond our comprehension, including what may be seemingly self contradictory and incompatible with one another, elsewhere. This may be seen from such Śrutis as "Aṇor aṇīyān mahato mahī yān/Asthūlam anaṇu/ Tvayīśvare brahmaṇi no virudhyate./ In normal experience we do not find a being possessed wholly solely of all good qualities and having not a single defect or drawback. But that does not make it impossible for God to be capable of having all good and no evil whatsoever. This is because God in the words of the Sūtrakāra is "Sarvadharmopapanna", that is Sarvaguṇapūrṇa and Sarvadoṣadūra at the same time. This is possible because God, while being desirous of possessing all auspicious attributes is, at the same time, capable of realising such a wish and in the same way while being desirous of being free from all imperfections is fully competent, in virtue of His Svātantrya, to realize his will. Madhva therefore expresses the twin aspects of Guṇapūrṇatva and doṣarāhitya of God. While possessing infinite perfections He is free from all imperfections which may be wrongly or ignorantly supposed to be present in Him by those of immature understanding.

गुणाः श्रुताः सुविरुद्धाश्च देवे सर्वश्रुता
अपि नैवात्र शंका
चिन्त्या अचिन्त्याश्च तथैव दोषाः
श्रुताश्च नाशैर्हि तथा प्रतीताः ।

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